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25 June 1993

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Liberia: Responsibility for the Harbel Massacre

Can we confirm who perpetrated the massacre?

1. No; we have only circumstantial and anecdotal evidence on the massacre of almost 500 civilians the night of 5 June at the displaced persons' camp outside Harbel. Most of this evidence consists of accounts by survivors, but their stories were often contradictory and vague. Much of the available evidence suggests however, that rebels from Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) probably were primarily responsible.

- Most survivors interviewed agreed--and a trail of bodies confirmed--that the attackers withdrew to rebel-held territory after the raid.
- Taylor's forces have a reputation for ruthlessness and have been accused of several mass killings over the past three years.
- There have been consistent reports in recent months that frontline rebel units have been short of food, thereby providing a possible motive for the attack.
- Taylor says that some survivors of the massacre fled to Gbanga for protection, but an alternative explanation for their presence in the rebel capital is that they may have been taken hostage by the rebels who raided the camp. [redacted]

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Could someone else have been responsible?

2. Yes; there is a real possibility that the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) troops guarding the camp were at least partly responsible. The UN special envoy's initial findings [redacted] indicate that AFL soldiers are at a minimum guilty of negligence and may also have been involved to some degree, although here, too, the evidence is circumstantial.

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- Survivors report that AFL troops had intimidated the refugees and tried to extort rice from camp residents the day of the attack.
- Survivors also have stated that many of the AFL soldiers guarding the facility went into town on the night of the attack, and that the few AFL soldiers left on duty did nothing to defend it; moreover, these guards all survived the attack. another AFL unit two miles from the camp was aware that the attack was taking place but neither responded nor notified West African regional forces.
- The AFL has a well substantiated history of mass killings that include mutilations similar to those inflicted on the Harbel victims. Moreover, the acting commander of the AFL battalion charged with guarding the camp has been implicated in the murder and mutilation of 16 teenage NPFL prisoners in February.
- AFL forces that arrived at the massacre site on the morning of 6 June looted the camp and probably destroyed evidence in the process--possibly deliberately.
- It is even conceivable that AFL and NPFL fighters--although enemies--jointly carried out the massacre.

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Can we confirm that the NPFL has perpetrated other massacres in recent weeks?

3. No. The UN envoy based some of his preliminary claim of NPFL responsibility for Harbel on what he says has been a pattern of NPFL massacres over the past month

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Did Taylor Order the Attack?

4. Probably not. Even if NPFL troops were responsible, there is no evidence to suggest that Taylor ordered the attack.

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5. It is also questionable whether ordering a massacre would have been consistent with Taylor's priorities. Although some observers believe Taylor might have sought to demonstrate his continued viability as a player in Liberia, we doubt he would have approved any operation that would have jeopardized current UN efforts to arrange all-party talks and a cease-fire.

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6. Assuming the NPFL was involved, the Harbel attack more than likely was conducted by a rogue rebel force. Such a unit was implicated in the killing of five American nuns last year.

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[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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No White Hats in Liberia

Liberia's various warring factions have a history of human rights abuses and atrocities against civilians. Since the current conflict began in 1989, the vast majority of casualties have been innocent civilians. Ethnic hatreds, a vicious cycle of retribution, undisciplined and often drugged troops, and the lack of punishment have all been contributing factors.

- The AFL, composed primarily of remnants of former President Doe's Army, has a well substantiated history of mass killings, including the massacre in July 1990 of over 600 displaced persons in a Lutheran church in Monrovia; a 1990 rampage through Nimba county, where AFL troops executed inhabitants of entire villages; and a 1985 campaign of retribution in which an undetermined number of Gios and Manos were killed. In recent months, AFL troops have been responsible for the murder of a British citizen, the execution of numerous NPFL prisoners, and other civilian deaths [REDACTED]
- The NPFL has been accused of several mass killings over the past three years, including those of 450 civilians in the Kle-Bomi Hills area last September; 160 Bassa civilians who were discovered in a mass grave near Buchanan in April 1992; and, according to Guinean President Conte, the killing of 1200 Liberian civilians near the Guinean and Sierra Leonean borders in mid-1991. Although none of these mass killings have been confirmed, undisciplined NPFL rebels operating independently probably have been responsible over the past several years for thousands of civilians deaths, including those of five American nuns last October.
- Circumstantial evidence suggests that ULIMO--an anti-Taylor faction aligned with ECOMOG, which includes some fighters from former President Doe's Army--has been responsible for summary executions and for killing scores of noncombatants in western Liberia since it occupied the region in mid-1992. ULIMO's abuses are not well substantiated, but ULIMO leader Kromah admits that his troops are undisciplined at times; he insists, however--with some justification, in our view--that their conduct is superior to NPFL's and AFL's. [REDACTED]

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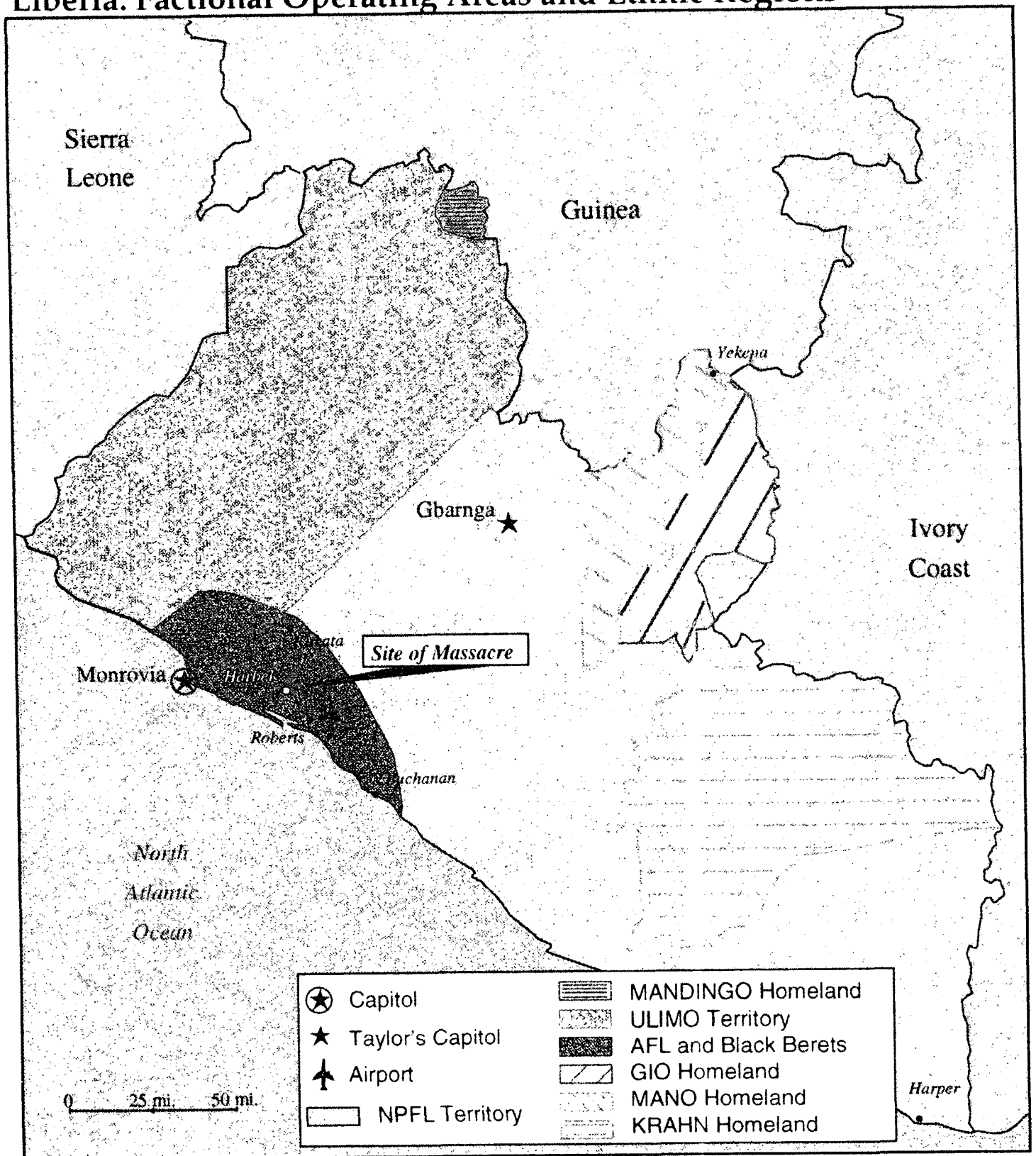
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Liberia: Factional Operating Areas and Ethnic Regions



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